

Improving Schooling for Cultural Minorities: The Right Teaching Styles Can Make a Big Difference

by Hani Morgan

Many minority groups in the United States tend to struggle in school. In 2004–2005, for example, the dropout rate for African American and Hispanic students exceeded that of white students (NCES 2007). Students from those groups are also less-frequently identified as gifted or talented (Elhoweris et al. 2005). Students from minority groups who tend to do well academically, such as Asian Pacific American children, can also experience difficulties in American schools. Pang (2008) discusses research indicating that the self-esteem of Asian Pacific American students is often lower than that of African American or Caucasian youth, in part because educators often misunderstand their needs.

One reason minority students are likely to encounter more problems in schools than mainstream students involves incomplete knowledge of minority students' learning and communication styles. Authors such as Banks (2006) and Pewewardy (2008) emphasize that minority students differ in the ways they learn and communicate. Those differences result partly from what a given culture considers appropriate or normal. In particular, child-rearing practices often differ from culture to culture. This paper will discuss how various cultures' communication styles and learning patterns can lead to conflicts and low academic achievement. The article also offers guidelines to avoid practices that can intensify the problems of educating students from cultural minority groups.

Minority students and even their parents may endure poor experiences if teachers fail to understand the ways people from different cultures communicate and learn. Students from a particular culture are likely to perform poorly academically, regard school negatively,

and break classroom rules (Dunn and Dunn 1993) if teaching styles do not match the ways they communicate and learn.

Avoiding Conflicts

One day in a fourth-grade classroom, a teacher notices two children of apparent Hispanic descent fighting. Walking toward the children, she asks them why they are quarreling. The two students look at the floor and say nothing. The teacher then takes out a referral form and tells the children, "If you do not look me in the eye right now and tell me what the fighting is all about, I will have the two of you suspended." The students continue to look at the floor, and the teacher proceeds to take severe disciplinary action against them.

At another school, an Arab parent new to America visits a classroom to learn about her child's progress. The parent approaches the teacher and stands about twelve inches away as she introduces herself. The teacher immediately takes a step back because she is unaccustomed to such close quarters with a visitor. The parent, now uncomfortable herself, decides that the teacher is not a warm and caring person.

These hypothetical examples involve cultural differences between groups that could lead to conflict. Teachers who thoroughly understand the cultures and communication styles of the groups mentioned are more likely to prevent such misunderstandings from worsening. In the first example, the Hispanic students are undoubtedly showing the teacher respect, but the teacher probably perceives them as deceitful. The reason for this is that Hispanic parents, like those of many other minority groups, teach their children to respect adults by looking down and remaining quiet. By contrast, Caucasian students are often taught that such behavior is disrespectful (Norman and Keating 1997).

The second case involves cultural differences concerning conversational distance. Individuals from Arab, Latin American, and Southern European countries generally stand much closer during conversations than do Americans, who usually remain at least twenty inches apart in such situations (Gollnick and Chinn 2009). A teacher unaware of that fact can unknowingly send a negative message to a parent or student from one of those groups.

Simply patting a child's head can cause conflict between cultures. For many Americans such behavior expresses approval; however, such pats could offend various Southeast Asian parents and children, many of whom believe that a person's spirit resides in the head (Gollnick and Chinn 2009).

Those examples by no means exhaust the cultural conflicts teachers can encounter when teaching diverse groups of students.

Ethnographers often study a given culture extensively to document the numerous different communication and learning styles among cultures. In addition, each group contains many subgroups. Arabic cultures, for example, can vary greatly from country to country as well as in socioeconomic class, geographic location, and religion. In addition, those Arabs who have decided to do things the American way will not be offended when educators speak to them at a distance greater than that used in Arab countries.

Differences in Learning Style

Various specialists in educating different cultural groups (e.g., Banks 2006; Gollnick and Chinn 2009) emphasize how students from different cultures learn differently. African American and Latino students, for example, tend to improve academically with cooperative learning methods of teaching (Aronson and Gonzales 1988). Such students tend to be *field-dependent*: they prefer working together. Research on Native American Indian and Alaska Native students suggests that they too prefer cooperative learning (Pewewardy 2008). In contrast, Anglo-American students, who tend to be *field-independent*, prefer to work alone (Banks 2006). Field-independent students are more likely to be detached, goal oriented, competitive, analytical, and logical (Irvine and York 1995; Pewewardy 2008). It is easier for such students to break down a whole subject or topic and understand that its parts added together can re-form the whole.

Differences in learning styles can often be explained by cultural norms and values. Native American cultures, for example, tend to value possessions much less than Anglo culture. As a result, Native Americans greatly respect people who share. Conversely, they are more likely to distrust someone with many possessions (Pewewardy 2008). That norm makes Native American students more likely to help other students and less likely to show that they know an answer if others do not. Judging Native American students as unmotivated or learning disabled because they do not raise their hands in response to a difficult question may unknowingly discriminate against them.

Although in many cases fear of showing off may also deter Asian Pacific American students from offering answers individually, their cultures' emphasis on humility and modesty makes them more likely to help one another (Pang 2008). Such cultures often view the teacher as an authority figure who transmits knowledge to students. Consequently, Asian Pacific American parents often expect their children to remain relatively quiet and to avoid discussion, which they regard as challenging the teacher's knowledge. Likewise, many Asian Pacific American students only reluctantly express their

feelings in creative writing, speech, and English, because their parents teach them to conceal their feelings (Pang 2008).

In addition, other students frequently believe that Asian students' academic success raises standards and makes school more difficult for everyone else. Their academic, physical, and linguistic characteristics often lead other students to consider them "nerds" (Pang 2008). In addition, teachers may not realize that some Asian students have trouble academically.

Treating Students Identically

Teachers may believe that treating all students the same way avoids discriminating against any group, but that practice in itself is discriminatory (Banks 2006; Gollnick and Chinn 2009). Requiring all students to follow one style of teaching can inadvertently favor the students who are most comfortable with the teacher's style of teaching. America's tremendous cultural diversity presents another difficulty for the culturally responsive teacher. The sheer number of cultures represented in a particular classroom can make it difficult or even impossible to address each one adequately. Although no easy answers can be offered for such concerns, knowledge of cultural differences will certainly avert many conflicts.

The "insider's" perspective that students and teachers of the same culture share helps them understand one another's teaching and communicating. Nieto and Bode (2008) refer to Foster's (1997) research, which demonstrates how shared norms of language use can benefit African American children. Foster concluded that when one African American teacher interacted with African American students and used a preaching style of speaking to direct the students, the teacher created a positive classroom climate absent in other classrooms.

The U.S. Census Bureau (2006) indicates that more than 80 percent of U.S. teachers are Caucasian. It is therefore understandable that teachers unfamiliar with students' cultures or upbringings can misdiagnose ethnic minority students as learning disabled, and it is not always feasible to reduce conflicts by matching teachers' and students' cultural backgrounds. In addition, many members of a given culture may lack interest in working as teachers or developing the skills good teaching requires, even with students from similar backgrounds.

Misusing Research on Cultural Differences

As previously discussed, generalizations can weaken culturally responsive teaching and even foster discrimination. Nieto and Bode (2008) refer to research on teachers who believed that Hispanic students would feel uncomfortable in leadership roles and consequently

prefer to share and work cooperatively. As a result, the teachers rarely allowed Hispanic students to work or make decisions on their own, although they allowed other students to do so. Teachers who lacked enough books for all students provided each non-Hispanic student with individual copies but made Hispanic children share.

That is a clear example of stereotyping and misusing research on how cultural differences relate to learning styles. Students' deficiencies in certain skills or their likelihood of failing at certain tasks does not mean such skills or tasks need not be taught. Culturally responsive teaching emphasizes gradually developing the skills and values a particular group lacks (Bennett 2007; Pewewardy 2008; Swisher 1991). Students benefit from exposure to the ways and values of different cultures (Pewewardy 2008), but their school experiences are likely to prove negative if they are constantly overwhelmed with values and teaching styles that differ from those of their cultures.

Some teachers may also hold low expectations of minority students because of statistics indicating that many will drop out or underachieve; that belief too is discriminatory, for much research shows that minority students seldom excel unless teachers hold high expectations (Gollnick and Chinn 2009; Nieto and Bode 2008).

Culturally Responsive Teaching

Although teachers in a culturally diverse society must reach students who learn and communicate in many different ways, the challenges should not overwhelm those who follow certain guidelines. Bennett (2007) notes that many teachers are gifted and capable of bridging cultural gaps. For students struggling with a particular skill such as performing a task individually rather than cooperatively, teachers can make the task easier or introduce the skill for a limited time (Bennett 2007; Pewewardy 2008; Swisher 1991).

To do that, teachers must examine their own teaching styles and understand the learning styles of their students without making generalizations. Teachers tend to teach the way they have learned unless deliberately challenged to teach otherwise (Bennett 2007). Rather than assume that a child from a given group has a particular learning style, they must use observation as well as consultation with parents to determine the child's best means of accomplishing a task.

One of the best teaching strategies in a culturally diverse society is to use as many modes as possible: logical-mathematical, linguistic, musical, spatial, bodily kinesthetic, interpersonal, naturalistic, and intrapersonal. Those categories of intelligences were first formulated by Howard Gardner (1993). Nieto and Bode (2008) emphasize the implications of multiple intelligences for culturally responsive

teaching: due to social, political, or geographic circumstances, many members of a given culture may be more advanced in one intelligence than members of another culture. Including activities that emphasize as many intelligences as possible rather than just one or two will likely create a more-democratic setting for diverse students. Such a strategy will also benefit classes with little or no diversity because within any given cultural group, the various members themselves learn in different ways. However, teachers need to remember that such a practice alone is insufficient to improve schooling experiences for many minority students.

Conclusion

At the 2004 Democratic National Convention, Barack Obama won the hearts of many Americans when he said, “There is not a Black America and a White America and Latino America and Asian America—there is the United States of America.” Nonetheless, the unity Mr. Obama celebrated in that speech may not materialize in U.S. schools unless educators understand how different cultures communicate and learn. Current statistics on dropout rates and achievement indicate alarming trends among certain groups. By making school a more-satisfying experience for many cultural minority groups, culturally responsive teaching should provide a better chance for academic gains.

Although considering a student’s background is important, educators must remember that cultural groups are ever-changing and diverse. Educators often forget or ignore that, and as a result, diversity programs can lead to disappointing results (Banks 2006). When members of a cultural group are viewed as similar to one another, a process termed *essentializing* occurs—a dangerous practice that can lead to discrimination (as in the example involving Hispanic students discussed earlier). Research that identifies certain groups’ learning styles or behavioral patterns can help teachers analyze individual students’ needs. For students weak in certain skills due to cultural norms, introducing the needed skills gradually allows students more time to learn new ways of accomplishing tasks. Introducing too many teaching or communicating methods unfamiliar to students of a particular culture increases the chances of frustrating them and sentencing them to poor school experiences.

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